

Thailand: Loei anti-mine villagers, activists threatened by gunfire

Friday 12 February 2021, by [PRACHATAI](#) (Date first published: 14 January 2021).

After repeated threats and assaults, villagers and activists protesting the impact of a gold mine have been shot at by a local government employee as they were trying to prevent ore from being smuggled out of the mine.

The gunshot incident took place on 12 January, the day after the Khon Rak Ban Koed group (KRBK - 'People Who Love Their Home') submitted a petition to the the Commissioner-General of the Royal Thai Police via the Wang Saphung District Police Superintendent, demanding safety measures to protect human rights defenders from potential threats.

KRBK members are from 6 villages in Wang Saphung District whose livelihoods have been affected by chemical contamination since the gold mine started operations in 2006.

After the petition was submitted, Wang Saphung District Police set up a complaint box at the mine entrance in Na Nong Bong village and dispatched additional officers to the area. Around 17.15, Thanakrit Anthara, a temporary employee of the district security division drove his car to the mine entrance where he quarrelled with the villagers and students who were keeping watch.

According to video footage and witnesses, Thanakrit, who seemed drunk, was wearing a jacket with the district logo and a side-arm. After a village guard successfully moved him away, he shot his pistol as he drove his car away from the scene, terrifying the people around.

At 20.12, Thanakrit turned himself in at the District Police Station. District Chief Prayoon Arunroot stated that Thanakrit is a temporary employee on a monthly contract. He was not assigned to the site and his action will result in him being fired. Further prosecution will be the task of the police.

Thanakrit will be held at the police station for up to 48 hours. Villagers opposed bail in fear of their safety. It was found that Thanakrit carries 2 guns. A police investigation into the firearms is underway.

As of 13 January, Thanakrit was allowed bail with a 20,000 baht insurance policy as surety. He gave an interview claiming that he was ordered by his chief "Chantip" to observe the "mobs" around the mine. He denied that he fired his gun in order to threaten the people.

Pranom Somwong, a representative from the international rights organization Protection International (PI) which has been monitoring the Loei mine case, was surprised by the court's decision.

Pranom said that the investigation officer had refused bail before passing the case to the court. The villagers are also concerned that the court let Thanakrit walk free as his action shows intent to threaten them.

The PI representative urged the relevant authorities to provide safety measures for the villagers around the mine, stating that it is a dangerous place as the remaining minerals in the mine have attracted attention from those who want them, even after the remaining ore was sold via auction in December 2020.

The gold mine became controversial when the villagers in surrounding areas felt they were affected by chemical contamination in streams, disturbance caused by from mine explosions and ore transportation, air pollution and internal conflicts that erupted within the villages. Villagers formed KRBK in 2007 to raise awareness over the mine's negative impact.

In 2012, the court declared Thung Kham Co Ltd bankrupt, leading to a halt in operations in mid-2013. Attempts by the company to retrieve leftover ore and renew its mining concession emerged from time to time. Villagers set up a team to watch that the remaining ore was not smuggled away.

The villagers have faced threats because of their campaigns. Tension reached a peak in September 2013 when the villagers barricaded the mine entrance, blocking trucks, each of which normally carries 15 tons of cyanide waste, from passing through their villages. They then had to live in fear of judicial harassment, thugs, gunmen and death threats.

On the night of 15 May 2014, about 200 armed men dressed in black stormed a villagers' checkpoint leading to the gold mine in an attempt to transport mineral ore from the mine. The unidentified men assaulted the villagers, used guns to intimidate them and held some of them hostage.

According to [Post Today](#), at least 50 million baht is demanded in the overall litigation brought by the company and the local authorities against the villagers, mainstream media and citizen journalists.

The threats remain until now. On the morning of 12 January when the petition was submitted, a man with a uniform devoid of identification took close-up photos of each villager. It was later found out that he was an undercover police officer after students surrounded him and pressured him to confess.

In December 2020, unidentified men with a military appearance claiming to be company officials, appeared in 6 villages around the mine, causing fear among villagers.

In December 2020, the remaining 190 sacks of ore were finally sold at auction with a 8,240,000 baht winning bid. The departure of the ore marks a good time for the villagers to start restoring the natural environment.

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